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Coronavirus (COVID-19) update: First Minister's speech - 19 December

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**This document is part of a collection**

Coronavirus update from the First Minister: 19 December 2020



Thank you for joining us.

As you can imagine, the fact that I am speaking to you at 5pm on the Saturday before Christmas - having just chaired an emergency meeting of my Cabinet and spoken to the leaders of the opposition parties - suggests a serious situation, and one that requires action to be taken.

The information I have received about the new variant of the virus suggest to me that we do face a serious situation right now. It is probably the most serious - and potentially dangerous - juncture we have faced since March.

But if we act now, we can prevent that serious situation materialising.

I want to set out clearly today what - for Scotland - the situation is;

I will set out why in light of that I consider very firm preventative action to be necessary;

And I will outline the further action that the Cabinet has this afternoon agreed to take.

As I set out in Parliament earlier this week, Covid cases in Scotland had been falling in recent weeks - as a result of the tough restrictions in place - but in the most recent week had started rising again in parts of the country.

As a result, a number of local authorities were put into tighter level 3 restrictions and a number of others required to stay there.

However, it is also the case that the situation in Scotland - right now - is not as severe as it is in other parts of the UK.

Cases per 100,000 of the population in Scotland are around half the number in England and around a third of the number in Wales.

And our statistics today - 572 new cases, representing 4% of all tests carried out yesterday - suggests a broadly stable position.

So all things being equal - while we had no room for complacency - we had hoped we might get through the next few weeks, at least in many parts of the country, without significantly more severe restrictions being necessary.

Unfortunately, as is so often the case with this virus, all things are not proven to be equal.

Last week, it was confirmed that a new variant of the virus had been identified in the UK, and I advised Parliament that a small number of cases of it had already been identified in Scotland.

Over last night and today, the governments of the four nations across the UK have received further scientific briefing on the impact of the new strain.

The UK Chief Scientific Adviser updated a 4 nations meeting that I participated in this morning and the CMO has updated cabinet this afternoon.

Firstly, it is important for me to be clear that - at this stage - there is no evidence to suggest that this new strain of the virus causes more severe illness.

And there is no evidence at this stage to suggest that new strain will affect the effectiveness of the vaccines that are being developed or the vaccine that is being used in Scotland.

All of that is reassuring.

However, there is now strong evidence that the new strain is spreading substantially more quickly than other strains we have been dealing with up to now.

Indeed, it is believed that it this faster transmission that may be driving the rapidly deteriorating situation in the south of England, including London, and in Wales - where cases are rising quickly and hospitals are under very severe and growing pressure.

We do not know how quickly the new strain of the virus is circulating widely in Scotland.

The latest information is that 17 cases have been identified in Scotland through genomic sequencing - but we need to be realistic that is likely to be an understatement of its true prevalence.

That means this strain is present here and that poses a real risk.

While further analysis is required to establish this one way or another, we already have a concern that this strain may be driving what appears to be faster transmission of COVID in some

hospitals and care homes.

So given that this strain is circulating we know widely in some parts of the UK and given that we know it is already seeded in Scotland and is already circulating albeit at a lower level in Scotland, the bottom line is this - if we don't act firmly and decisively now to stop it, it will take hold here.

And if that happens, the very serious and rapidly worsening situation we see unfolding now in Wales, London and the south east of England will develop here too.

And that would mean many more people getting COVID in the weeks ahead and by January, our NHS being potentially overwhelmed and many more people dying which we have managed to avoid at every stage of this pandemic. And that would mean many more people dying from this virus.

To those who say this action is not justified because our current case levels are relatively low, I would say this.

4 weeks ago, London's cases were very low too - and now they are running out of control.

That is what we face if we do nothing, or do too little.

So is why cabinet has decided that further action is necessary. And that it needs to be firm.

It is true that this action is not solely in response to the severity of our current situation, nor even a worry about greater interaction over Christmas period in and of itself.

It is very firmly, action designed to prevent things getting worse - potentially very quickly - as a result of this new strain.

I know that accepting greater restrictions on this basis - not as a result of what is happening now, but to stop the situation deteriorating - is hard for people to accept. I really understand that.

But the most important thing we have learned through this pandemic is that failing to act quickly, decisively and preventatively in the face of this virus is always a mistake.

If I could have my time over again, I would act more quickly in February and early March. It is important that we do take the warning we are being given now very seriously and make sure our actions are appropriate in the face of that,

My judgment is that if we do nothing now or do too little - knowing what we now know about this new strain - things will get worse, and be much worse than they need to be.

But if we act now, we have a chance of keeping this situation under control while the vaccination programme continues to make progress and get case numbers back to very low levels again.

That's why we have decided to act and to act firmly.

The action we propose is designed to do two things. And both of these things are important.

First, to prevent more of this new strain entering Scotland, from parts of the UK where it is already circulating widely.

And, second, given that we know this strain is already present in Scotland – albeit we think in lower numbers right now – this action is designed to reduce the risk of it spreading any further here.

Let me turn now to what Cabinet has decided.

Firstly, we are asking everyone to redouble your personal efforts in sticking to the rules and following FACTS. That may sound obvious but it is really important.

That means staying out of each other's houses. It means abiding by travel restrictions, it means keeping a safe distance from people in other households and it means following all the hygiene advice really strictly.

If you have been letting your guard stop, which given what we have all lived under might be understandable, please lift it again.

Secondly, in order to reduce the risk of more of this strain being imported into Scotland, we intend to maintain a strict travel ban between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Unfortunately and I am genuinely sorry about this, that will remain in place throughout the festive period. We simply cannot risk more of this strain entering the country if we can possibly avoid it.

That means people from Scotland not visiting other parts of the UK and vice versa. Cross border travel for all but the most essential purposes is not permitted.

We are also asking Police Scotland and transport operators to consider how the enforcement of this can be strengthened in the period ahead. Though of course how that is done is an operational matter for the Chief Constable.

We will also be reviewing, urgently over the next day or so, the position on international travel and I will update on that early next week.

In the meantime, my strong advice continues to be against non-essential foreign travel.

Thirdly, we have already advised that where possible people should celebrate Christmas at home in their own household and meet with others outdoors only.

The five day flexibility from the 23rd to 27th December was planned to recognise the impact of loneliness and the difficulty I know we all feel in leaving loved ones alone over Christmas.

However, earlier this week we advised that people should meet indoors with other households - if at all - on no more than one day over the five day period.

Given the concern we now have about this new strain, we now intend to change the law to allow indoor mixing in a bubble on Christmas Day only. From a minute past midnight on Christmas day

to a minute past midnight on Boxing Day.

In large parts of England, as the Prime Minister has just announced, that will not be allowed. We will allow Christmas Day to go ahead but, as we have said from the start, only use this flexibility if you really, truly need to.

This new strain makes that message all the more important.

Our advice is still not to meet indoors, even on Christmas day, at all if you can possibly avoid it.

And, if you had people travelling to join you for Christmas from anywhere else in the UK that will no longer be permitted.

Equally, it will no longer be permitted for any of us to travel to anywhere in the UK for Christmas – we simply cannot take the risk of this strain traveling to different parts of the UK.

If you do decide to travel within Scotland, that will be allowed, but only on Christmas Day.

If you cannot make it there and back in the same day, please don't go.

And we are asking you not to do even that unless there is genuinely no alternative.

Finally, on Christmas Day the household limits will still apply as we had set out for the five day period: a maximum of 8 people from 3 households will be the law. But our advice will be to minimise those numbers as far as possible.

Standing here saying this makes me want to cry. As I'm sure listening to it will make you want to cry because I know how harsh this sounds.

I know how unfair it is.

But the virus is unfair.

It does not care about Christmas.

It does not care about anything other than spreading itself as far and wide as possible.

And it just became unfortunately a lot better at doing that.

If you have caring responsibilities, you can, as has always been the case, still visit someone else and travel to do that if it is essential to do so in order to provide care or assistance to a vulnerable person.

For everyone else, my message is stay home, stay safe and enjoy Christmas. That is in your own interest and the interest of everybody you love.

Beyond Christmas, because of the new virus strain, we need to make some changes.

This is my fourth point.

To limit as far as we can the risk of this strain spreading further than it has within Scotland, we intend to apply level 4 measures to all of mainland Scotland for a period of three weeks from one minute after midnight on Boxing Day morning.

The exceptions to that will be Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles, and the other island communities where we have reduced restrictions in recent weeks, these areas will go into level 3 but with strict restrictions on who can travel to and from them.

All these levels will be reviewed after two weeks.

To be clear, that means that from Boxing Day morning, non-essential shops will close, as will pubs, cafes and restaurants. Takeaway food will continue to be allowed.

Finally, since the summer, we have been determined to keep schools open. That remains our determination as far as we possibly can.

We have asked people to bear a greater burden of restrictions so that we could afford to keep pupils in our classrooms.

The situation of the new strain though means that until we are sure it is firmly under control – until we are sure we are not facing the same situation as the south of England or Wales - we must slightly change our plans for how schools operate after the Christmas period.

Schools still open next week will close on schedule as previously planned – we are not changing that.

They were then due to reopen from the 5th of January with all councils areas back by the 7th.

Instead of that, here is what we are now going to do -

For the children of key workers – such as nurses in our hospitals – schools will open as previously scheduled. They will also open as normal for the most vulnerable children.

All teachers will also return to work as scheduled and as planned.

For the majority of pupils, however, the holiday period is being extended until 11th January.

Starting on that date, learning will be online until at least 18th January.

After that, assuming we are confident we have the virus under control we will aim to reopen schools fully but at least until the 18 January, schools will go online only other than for the children of key workers and the most vulnerable.

Thank you for bearing with me. I am going to ask the Chief Medical Officer and the National Clinical Director to say a word or two after me.

I have taken a bit of time to set all of this out because I know how difficult this is and that is where I want to conclude.

I know this is difficult because it is Christmas and I know it is difficult because it is involving greater restrictions for a period after Christmas. And I know it is also difficult because I know that right now our case numbers look as if they are not as bad as elsewhere.

And therefore I understand people will be thinking is this necessary.

Please believe me when I tell you, with every fibre of my being, I would not be standing here on Saturday before Christmas announcing this if I did not think this was necessary.

I have spent, as many of you have, many anxious and worried days over the course of the past ten months. But I have rarely felt more worried since much earlier in the year as I have today. If we don't act now firmly and decisively this new strain is transmitting so quickly that it will very quickly overwhelm us.

I want to do everything I can to reduce that possibility and that is why these very difficult but very necessary measures are being outlined today.

I briefed the leaders of the opposition parties earlier on. I will set out to parliament, as and when the Presiding Officer thinks that is necessary. But I didn't want to leave any time before setting out to you the public what these plans are – particularly given the proximity to Christmas.

I know how difficult a Christmas this was always going to be but now in particular it will be even more difficult.

I am genuinely sorry about that but we must take care, collectively, to stop this virus overwhelming us to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe and stop people dying unnecessarily.

Therefore I ask you to bear with us as we try to navigate our way through this next difficult stage of this pandemic.

My final point is this – I've said a couple of times in recent weeks that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. There is a light, it has not gone out.

The vaccination programme will pick up pace as we go into January but I've also said there will be times because we are still in this pandemic when the light will be difficult to see.

That's the stage we are at right now. We can't see the light at the moment because of this difficult phase but it hasn't gone out. It is still there. We do have brighter times ahead but in order to get us safely as possible to those brighter times I need to ask you for more sacrifices for a period.

Thank you.

Was this helpful?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, but

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